

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
 INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

 SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
 TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS
1 NAME

HISTORIC

Balaban & Katz Oriental Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

The Oriental Theatre

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

20 West Randolph Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

CITY, TOWN

Chicago

VICINITY OF

#1

STATE

Illinois

CODE

60601

COUNTY

Cook

CODE

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY		OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC ACQUISITION	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE		<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE		<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT			<input type="checkbox"/> YES RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES-UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Randolph Building Corporation

STREET & NUMBER

32 W. Randolph Street

CITY, TOWN

Chicago

VICINITY OF

Illinois

STATE

60601

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC

Recorder of Deeds

510

17-09-439-005

STREET & NUMBER

118 N. Clark Street

Cook County

CITY, TOWN

Chicago, 60602

STATE

Illinois

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

 FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL
DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Oriental Theatre is located at 20 West Randolph Street in the Civic Tower building (nee New Masonic building). Both were designed by the Chicago firm of Rapp and Rapp (1906-1968). The Oriental opened its doors on May 8, 1926 and Chicago added one more shining gem to its crown of cinema palaces. The impressive Masonic building was completed later that summer.

The office structure rises to a height of 24 stories and is of steel frame construction, clad in buff brown terra cotta. Masonry side and rear walls are accentuated with terra cotta trim. The Oriental Theatre and eight floors of Masonic halls are housed in a large structure at the rear, which is also of steel frame with reinforced concrete and masonry covering.

The facade is divided into three parts: a powerful base, repetitive office floors and a five story top. It is representative of the modern skyscraper design that was influenced by the Paris Exposition of 1925 (which the Rapps attended) and later became known as Art Deco. This is most apparent in the material, detailing and vertical emphasis of the building which is a highly stylized adaptation of gothic revival. The west facade is composed of a two story entrance to the office building. The east side contains the theatre entrance and marquee. At street level between the two entrances are store fronts enclosed in large plate glass windows. Stores on the second floor employ more conventional office type windows.

The third and fourth stories make up the next section, divided by spandrels of ornamental terra cotta, each story contains double hung windows. A gothic moulding separates the fourth from the fifth and top story of the base section, which is of 10 windows topped by a narrow cornice.

Above this base begins the repetitive middle section which is set off by corner bays rising uninterrupted for 14 stories and containing paired double hung windows. The central bays are slightly recessed and are composed of eight windows separated by continuous piers, which strongly emphasize the vertical character of the design. Recessed spandrels ornamented with heraldic shields, serpents and the Masonic logo, separate these stories. The nineteenth story is crowned by a cornice that extends around the sides of the building. Where the cornice meets the piers of the central bays, these piers thrust outward and continue up as stylized buttress-like vertical ribs. At the base of the 21st story, these ribs are recessed and then rise to the full height of the building ending with double peaks.

The eight window openings, of the central bays, at the 20th story level contain narrow paired windows. The 21st level is recessed and without windows, while the 22nd and 23rd stories are connected by two story high paned windows topped by

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arches whose keystones extend up through the middle of the windowless 24th floor. Above these keystones are inset decorative panels that are guarded over by bull head gargoyles that rim the parapet.

The corner piers are treated as a single unit from the 21st story to the parapet. Each contains a 3/4 story pointed arched window. A decorative band breaks up the panes horizontally at the 22nd level, while a spired pier bisects the vertical panes. Two spires rise from the sides of these windows to the peaked parapet. A wide band of gothic tracery flanks the outermost spire and completes the corner and sides of the building.

Today, the facade has been simplified by the removal of the buttress-like ribs and occasional sections of cornice. The two story office entrance is now clad in green marble. The exterior hints of what lay beyond, are the stud lit three story grand window under which spreads the theatre marquee. To the right above the grande window was the massive Oriental vertical sign which towered overhead from floors four through fifteen. Today, four steel I beams are all that remain.

Passing under the marquee at street level, past the box office with its decorative mosaic tile "O", one enters the outer ticket lobby with its elephant head wall sconces and plate glass ceiling (now painted over), past the two additional cashier windows and into the grande lobby. It is from here, all the way back to the proscenium arch that Rapp and Rapp have produced one of the most incredible interior themes ever designed in this country. "They (Rapp and Rapp) have taken as a theme the spirit of the famous Indian Durbar, that renowned East Indian Carnival - the most colorful gorgeous spectacles of its kind in the world. The whole pageant is a romantic spirit of music, theatrical colors and festive beauty".

The grande lobby, 46' wide and 35' deep, is an impressive four story space lit by the grande window above the entrance to the theatre. Ascending to the second story, along the side walls are the heavy bronze railed staircases that are connected at their landings by a railed balcony. At the head of the staircases on each side are square pillars of scagliola crowned by enormous capitals supporting the polychromed ceiling of carved figures and heavy mouldings. Suspended overhead are two mammoth bronze jeweled chandeliers created by the Victor Pearlman Company of Chicago (removed in the late 1960's). On the side walls

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above the staircases tower two mosaics, done in golden tiles, of an indian prince and princess and framed in decorative plaster.

It was this lobby where patrons waited behind brass posts and velvet ropes for the next attraction to begin.

Beneath the staircase one passes through into the inner foyer which is a surprisingly narrow 16 feet, but curves 120 feet around the rear of the auditorium. Everywhere decorative plaster buddhas and indian dancers abound dressed in metallic colored glazes. Ten black scagliola pilasters support the ceiling and light sparkles down from three additional chandeliers. The mezzanine promenade circles above (on the left) behind a custom bronze balustrade. Here patrons could pause to rest on one of the elephant throne chairs, or wonder at the fine framed oil paintings which graced the walls.

The trip to the Orient continues as one enters one of the seven sets of bronze aisle doors into the mammoth auditorium. Passing directly under the shallow mezzanine with cove lit diaramas skirting its facade, one continues under the sweeping balcony soffit (also exotically cove lit) to the orchestra pit rail where he pauses and turns to wonder at the "hasbeesh dream decor" of the seven story cinema temple that surrounds him. The auditorium was best described by Rapp and Rapp themselves as having "intricacies of Eastern magnificence, grotesque dancers and indian animal figures, resplendent with lights behind colored glass around ornate shrine-like niches". The main floor at center is 122 feet wide and extends from the rear wall 112 feet to the stage proscenium. There is total seating for 3124 on the main floor, mezzanine, and the great balcony.

The customary movie palace arrangement prevailed in the auditorium, beginning at the proscenium arch opening of 54 feet with the orchestra lift directly in front. Flanking the proscenium arch on each side are the decorative plaster organ grills, behind which are housed the pipes for the Wurlitzer organ. The organ console is decorated in chinese red lacquer and trimmed in black lacquer and gold gilt. It rises out of the orchestra pit embellished with crimson firebirds.

Below the organ grills at mezzanine level are box seats which were a common convention in legitimate theatres. They were unusual, however, in movie palaces due to the extreme angle to the screen which caused distortion.

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The balcony side wall is of heavy decorative motifs centering around the famous 14 story tall indian dancer in her wall niche. She is protected overhead by a canopy of plaster filagree while decorative pilasters support a large cove lit area above that contains pin spots that highlight important details. This area is set off by stained glass set behind a lacework of plaster. Two glass globe fixtures, that glow a red orange like the setting sun, are suspended in front of the cove. A seated buddha rests atop this cove to support the thestres crowning glory; the large silver textured doms with it's flower motif medallion of deep blue and green. All areas of the theatre are lamped in the three primary light colors to produce any color the mind can imagins.

It is interesting to note the projection booth, which protrudes out over the rear of the balcony and rests on the heads of six indian princesss. Three more seated figures watch over the projection portholes and the whole area is bathed in light from the wide cove which surrounds it.

Today, the theatre is changed little except for the removal of the glass panel rear auditorium walls between aisles 2 and 5 to accomodate concession areas. Fifty years of wear have necessitated the repainting of walls throughout the lobbys from metallic polychrome and glaze to simple flat paint.

In 1967, the owners had hoped to twin the theatre by creating an additional movie house on stage; all of the counterweight system was removed. When this venture proved too costly, a tunnel was built at the rear of the stage to connect the office building with the back alley. The eight floors of dressing rooms remain intact as well as the stags basement with rehearsal rooms, band rooms, and orchestra lift equipment room. The stage lighting board is original and intact.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY: Cinema	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES

5-8-1926

BUILDER/ARCHITECT C.W. & Geo Rapp

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Oriental Theatre and surrounding Masonic building and auditoriums were designed in 1925 by the prominent Chicago firm of C.W. and George L. Rapp (1878-1941). George Rapp started his career as an assistant designer to Edmund Krause working on the new Majestic Theatre (now the Shubert Theatre). Geo Rapp along with his older brother, Cornelius W. Rapp (d. 1926) created the firm of Rapp & Rapp and went into practice in 1906. Their first commissions were many of the earliest motion picture houses that had rapidly evolved out of the old store front Nickelodeon. Their first successful movie palace was the Central Park, in Chicago, designed for Balaban & Katz in 1917. From that time, until 1932, Rapp & Rapp were to become leaders in the field of theatre architecture designing such notable structures as the Chicago, Tivoli and Uptown Theatres in Chicago, the Times Square Paramount in New York City, Michigan Theatre and office building in Detroit and Shea's Buffalo Theatre in Buffalo, New York (a National Registry listing). Rapp & Rapp also ventured into non-theatrical structures, notably the Leland Hotel in Detroit, Fort Dearborn Bank Building at 203 N. Wabash and the Bismark Hotel and adjoining Palace Theatre in Chicago. The Oriental Theatre was built by the firm of Balaban and Katz as their sixth commission in an ever expanding empire of Chicago cinema palaces.

Young Abe and Barney Balaban started out around 1908 with their first theatre, the Kedzie, a nickelodeon of 100 folding chairs, located at Kedzie and 12th Street. With Abe singing, sister Ida playing piano and five brothers ushering, it was truly a family venture. Such was the success of the Kedzie, that the Balabans joined by Sam Katz, opened their first theatre with a balcony, the Circle, in 1913. Business flourished and in 1917, Balaban and Katz hired Rapp and Rapp to design the first deluxe movie house in Chicago. The Central Park had 2400 seats with a mezzanine and balcony, and thanks to Barney's experience in a cold storage plant, it was air conditioned. Balaban and Katz made sure that everyone of their theatres was "comfortably cool" from that time on - it became one of their trademarks. In the lushness of its appointments and quality of its services and productions, the Central Park rivaled anything that even New York had to offer at the time. Balaban and Katz theatres became the mainstay of Chicago entertainment and they built at an astounding rate, in addition to absorbing every major movie exhibitor in the city, until they became the undisputed monopoly in Chicago. Growth continued by merging with Famous Players Lasky in Detroit and Canada. Sam Katz went to New York in the mid 1920's and helped form Publix Theatres which along with Adolph Zukor's Paramount Pictures became the largest cinema chain in the world. Balaban and Katz kept their

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name on every Chicago marquee and remained leaders in the city until 1969 when the corporation sold it's holdings.

The new Masonic building is a masterpiece of engineering. Noteworthy here is the fact that the Oriental Theatre occupies floors 1 through 8 of the rear of the building. Built directly over the theatre are 4 Masonic halls on the 9th floor, 3 halls on the 10th floor, 2 on the 12th floor and one as large as the theatre itself on the 14th to 16th floors. The fact that there are eight atries (10 auditoriums), all with no visible support, directly above the theatre which throughout it's whole interior contains no visible supports, is certainly a tribute to Rapp and Rapp's engineering abilities.

The Oriental Theatre had to deal with various design problems. The most important was, how to entertain the hundreds of patrons waiting (sometimes up to an hour) in the lobby and lounges for the previous performance to end so that they may be seated themselves. This became a universal problem with movie houses, whereas, legit theatres held one performance, movie theatres ran 4 or 5 shows daily which involved several changes of audience. At this point, it was up to the architect to provide entertainment in the form of the building itself. It must also be noted that the Oriental was a downtown movie palace and therefore attracted the more transient young flappers who were out on the town for dinner, dance and a more sensory type of entertainment than the middle class family who went to Saturday matinees at their neighborhood movie house. As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote at the turn of the decade, "America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history". The Oriental was without doubt the epitome of 1920's "gaudiness", but in such a way as to entertain and fulfill these basic functions.

The Oriental is constructed on the site of the historic Iroquois Theatre which burned in 1906 killing 600 people. Today, the Oriental retains the flame scorched south and west stage walls of the Iroquois. Marks still indicate locations of the Iroquois dressing rooms on the south wall.

In their theatre designs, Rapp and Rapp used nine basic formats. The Oriental is the only one of this type in Illinois. The Ambassador Theatre in St. Louis (closed) used the same basic auditorium configuration. This design was characterized by the use of angular shapes, a squared off proscenium arch with peaked top, tall spiring organ grills that employed vertical line emphasis and sparse decoration, a deep trapezoidal cove over the organ grills, flat sidewalls devoid of arches, but broken up a large niche similar in shape to the organ grills, a flat rear balcony wall, and a large free form dome area rather than the classical circular dome. The Oriental design displayed hints of art deco and was Rapp and Rapp's first venture into this new international style.

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In an era when escape was the word, the Oriental was the epitome of that idea. This became especially true after the Wall Street crash of 1929 and subsequent years of depression. At a time when people were losing jobs, their life savings and most important, their self respect, the movie palaces proved to be the largest, single moral booster around. Quoted from "American Theatres Today", Harold Rambush stated in 1929, "In our big modern movie palaces there are collected the most gorgeous rugs, furniture and fixtures that money can produce. No kings or emperors have wandered through more luxurious surroundings. In a sense, these theatres are social safety valves, in that the public can partake of, the same luxuries as the rich and use them to the same full extent."

The Oriental had since its opening day, provided its patrons with the finest cinema features that Hollywood could produce. To augment the feature picture, Balaban and Katz music and stage departments kept out doing themselves in providing the finest in classical entertainment, as well as musicians and actors who performed the latest jazz hits of the day.

The greatest of these was red-haired Paul Ash and his "Merry Mad Musical Gang". Show biz giant Jack Partington had discovered Ash in the pit of an Oakland vaudeville house around 1919. Noticing that the audience had their eyes on the band and not the show, he decided to reap the benefits of Ash's eccentric talent. Partington built a show around the "Raggedy Andy of Music" and up out of the pit at the San Francisco Granada rose a hot new phenomenon. A new form of movie palace entertainment was born - the stage band which along with a troupe of stars became the show rather than merely the accompaniment. In 1925, Balaban and Katz lured Paul Ash to Chicago with a promise of a theatre devoted to his particular insanities. At the Oriental, Paul and the Gang were billed as the main attraction and soon became the idol of many a swooning female fan. It was because of Ash and the new stageband idea, that the Oriental was designed with a small orchestra pit, but instead had several hydraulic stage elevators. This was the only movie palace in Chicago to afford this luxury and the only theatre Rapp and Rapp designed with this feature.

Even the "mighty Wurlitzer" theatre organ caused a sensation when it rose out of the depths of the Oriental into the spotlight in 1926. Henri A. Keates was at the console. The organ was built by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York. It contains four manuals (keyboards) and 20 ranks of pipes and is Publix One, a proto type that was copied and used later in large Publix Theatres across the country.

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At the time of the theatres opening, these great instruments were used to accompany silent movies and for solo work at intermissions and during stage shows. Dubbed "unit orchestras" they were capable of producing the sounds of a symphony orchestra, a classical church organ, and a variety of sound effects - drums, bells, horns, birds, whistles and more.

Today, the organ is beautifully maintained by the American Theatre Organ Society and is presented several times a year in concert.

The list of theatrical and cinematic personalities who performed live on the stages at the Oriental would include many of the greatest show business legends.

In 1934, the stage show included as a fast replacement second act, a trio of singers called the Gumm Sisters. With a name like Gumm, they were not going to get very far, they were told by the shows headliner, George Jessel. Having just talked to New York and with his agents last name fresh in his head, Jessel introduced the act for the second show as the Garland Sisters. For the first time ever, the Orientals marquee flashed the name of Judy Garland, and truly a star was born.

The overwhelming impact of cinema on the world of the 1920's is embodied in the theatre itself. Built at the height of the silent movie era, the Oriental was the materialization of Hollywood's flickering images. To the millions of Chicagoans who reveled in it's splendore, the Oriental was, the exotic mystery in Theda Bara's eyes, the inanities of Fatty Arbuckle, daring dreams of romance with Rudolph Valentino, and the "IT" that Clara Bow so exquisitely exuded "restless sensuality tinged, perhaps with flapper hysteria and a dash fo style".

Today, the Oriental stands as a monument to the talents of Rapp and Rapp, the love and dedication of Balaban and Katz to the arts in Chicago and fond memories of a more fun loving time. They say that history repeats itself though. Now, even more than 50 years ago, we are searching for the harmless escape that the Oriental can still afford us. Potential dice only in the hearts of men... not great buildings.

ENTRIES IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

STATE ILLINOIS

Date Entered SEP 26 1978

<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u>
New Masonic Building and Oriental Theater	Chicago Cook County

Also Notified

Honorable Charles H. Percy
Honorable Adlai E. Stevenson
Honorable Cardiss Collins

COPY OF CONGRESSIONAL NOTIFICATION